

# Some Aspects of Hagiography in the Celtic Church

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The introduction of the Celtic Church in Britain and Ireland in the fourth and fifth centuries brought about the introduction of new and foreign beliefs, traditions and institutions from the Roman Church of late antiquity. With the foundation and rise of the monasteries, a new class of holy men came into being. These early monks and missionaries, who became the first saints of the Celtic Church, inherited the status held by their pagan counterparts and, in the minds of the people, not a few of their supernatural attributes.

The monastic communities fostered the beginnings of a vernacular written tradition. Scribes, trained and educated in the monastic schools in classical and Judaeo-Christian literature and literary forms, began to produce a new literature alongside the copies of Gospels, scriptural texts, and compositions from the writers of the Roman and Eastern Churches, including saints' Lives.<sup>1</sup> Hagiography was a branch of the new literature, deriving from European models, but infused with native, traditional material. The Irish monasteries, as was the custom in the religious communities of the continent, honoured their founders and distinguished members, according them in death a glorification which in a secular context would be reserved for people whom the storytellers regarded as heroes who were celebrated in tales and songs. The saints, like these heroes, attracted to themselves numerous legends of extraordinary deeds and supernatural phenomena, but in a Christian, as opposed to a pagan, context. As one scholar has put it:<sup>2</sup>

"the saints were the heroes of the new order. Emain and Tara had passed away but Armagh and Kildare were to endure forever. . . . The glories of a pagan civilisation were eclipsed by those of the Christian wonder-worker".

To say that the Irish hagiographers treated their saints as heroes in the same sense as the secular storytellers treated their subjects is not mere rhetoric; this idea is integral to the "saintly" image which they, the writers of saints' lives, sought to present. It is implicit, also, in their belief in the saints. The concept of a saint, in the Celtic Church especially, was not based entirely upon ideas of moral rectitude: the essential quality of a saint was his

<sup>1</sup> See R. Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (Oxford, 1943, reprint 1973), ch. 1.

<sup>2</sup> J. F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (New York, 1929), i, 302.

aura of divine power manifested in his ability to work miracles.<sup>3</sup> Although Christian hagio-biography was a foreign import, a perusal of Irish saga literature and king tales suggests that legends of miracle-workers had a place in the native tradition. The Lives of the saints contain elements of magic, fantasy, and the supernatural which are the essence of popular tales, yet reworked into a Christian setting for the purpose of the Irish Church.

The saints here discussed are those who flourished in Ireland and Scotland during a period from the fifth to the ninth centuries. The links between the churches of Ireland and Scotland were strengthened by the founding of Iona and St Columba's mission to the Picts. Iona became a notable centre for book production, as did its chief daughter foundation, Lindisfarne. Thus the Church in Ireland and Scotland shared a common literary, not to mention linguistic, tradition, for several centuries. The tradition of writing saints' Lives was shared by the Celtic Church as a whole; the earliest Lives composed in insular Celtic Britain were written in Latin, the ecclesiastical language, rather than in the vernacular. In most cases, the Life of a saint was written several generations after his *floruit*. The manuscript texts of the majority of Irish saints' *vitae* date from not earlier than the tenth century, having gone through various hands in transition. In spite of centuries of editing and copying (not always accurately), the basic structure of the Lives remains, enabling them to be viewed in terms of literary composition.

The form, style, and presentation of the Lives of the Irish saints show a familiarity with the conventions of continental hagiography, but in their basic structure these Lives bear a resemblance to the *Heldensagen* of secular tradition. The two traditions, ecclesiastical and secular, merge in the Lives to create a genre of literature which is religious on the surface but heroic at a deeper level.

In order to see the Lives of the Irish saints and the tales of the Irish heroes in their proper perspective and relationship, it is expedient to discuss the foreign Christian and native Irish traditions from which they sprang. Heroic tradition in Ireland, in its earliest expression, is preserved in the tales once told as part of the repertoire of the professional class of storytellers. The heroic tales, which are set in a dim past, reflect a country governed by a warrior aristocracy in a tribal organisation. A great value is placed upon skill in weapons and warfare. This, according to H. M. Chadwick, signifies a stage of social development common to most European cultures, the so-called "Heroic Age" of a civilisation.<sup>4</sup>

3 *Ibid.*, 303.

4 See H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912).

In his work, *The Growth of Literature*,<sup>5</sup> written in collaboration with his wife Nora Chadwick, he has pointed out that the type of literature which relates to the Heroic Age, and which is defined as heroic, is found in most European literatures, including Celtic, and is more or less uniform as regards narrative themes and structures. The main features of heroic literature, in the Chadwicks' opinion, are an aristocratic milieu (the main characters being from a princely class), a setting on the battlefield or in the royal court, a preoccupation with warfare and in particular individual combat, and an emphasis on the "cardinal virtues" of a hero: courage, strength, loyalty, and generosity.<sup>6</sup>

The Chadwicks' concept of an Age of Heroes is based upon an historical outlook, upon a study of the political and social conditions which existed in Ireland within a period from prehistoric times to about the early eighth century A.D. The type of literature which relates to this age, they claim, can only be composed when the conditions which define a Heroic Age, according to their criteria, have been in existence. This presupposes the notion that the "growth of literature" in a society is contingent upon political and social events and that there is a "progression" in literary development.

Literature, like society, may go through a series of changes and changing influences, but it is a mistake to consider early literature, or early societies, as simple or primitive, from which more advanced structures develop. The Chadwicks' approach to heroic literature is to comb the contents of hero-tales for historical information, while ignoring the composition of the tales as literary constructions. The Lives of the saints may be explored, with caution, for historical data, but in a literary approach, the history which may be found in any literature is history of attitudes and ideas.

In a different approach, Sir Maurice Bowra maintains that it is legend, not history, which gives rise to the idea of a Heroic Age. Legend, in his analysis, does not concern itself with political situations and the "general process of human change", but with "dominant personalities and their more sensational events".<sup>7</sup> As regards Heroic Ages, we may say that it is the emphasis of the type of personality in the literature relating to such an age which defines the historical period from a literary standpoint.

Irish heroic literature has tended to be aristocratic in outlook, it being the duty of the professional storyteller to master the chief

<sup>5</sup> *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge, 1932), i, ch. 2-4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-79.

<sup>7</sup> *The Meaning of a Heroic Age* (Earl Grey Memorial Lecture, 1957), 7.



stories of Ireland and to narrate them to kings and nobility.<sup>8</sup> It has been suggested that the treatment given to these tales has some bearing on Irish hagiography. On that point, Sean Mac Airt states:<sup>9</sup>

"In this attitude to traditional materials one is tempted to see the lay parent of hagiographical literature, which was cultivated mainly for religious edification, the glorification of monastic founders, and for the purpose of asserting church prerogatives."

Just as heroes such as Cuchulainn and Finn mac Cumhaill were the dominant personalities of their time and fitting subjects for a professional storyteller to relate to his patrons, so, too, were the saints like Patrick and Columba the dominant figures of their age and the focus of attention to church historians of later generations.

In the historical terms set by Nora Chadwick, an Age of Saints occurred in Ireland and spanned a period from the late fifth to the late ninth centuries, during which time Christianity took root and flourished.<sup>10</sup> The intellectual and political growth of the Celtic Church received great stimulus during this age of ecclesiastical development through the foundation of the monasteries which were not only communities for spiritual guidance but also centres of education. Mrs Chadwick sees the "Age of Saints" as the natural successor to the "Age of Heroes"; it was an age of learning, in which the pen replaced the sword, an age dominated by the educated holy men of the Church.<sup>11</sup> What Mrs Chadwick is describing is not a change in social and political structures, but a change in mentality reflected in the output of ecclesiastical literature. The change from Heroic Age to Age of Saints in Ireland and Britain was certainly not "natural", if there is such a thing in history. Mrs Chadwick offers a somewhat simplistic historical view of the changes taking place among the Celts with the introduction of Christian ideas and culture.

The Lives of the saints were usually composed within the saints' own monastic communities by one of the members. Cogitosus, a monk of Kildare, wrote to preserve the memory of St Brigid; Muir-chu followed suit for his patron saint, Patrick, and Adomnan, the ninth abbot of Iona, wrote his *Life of Columba* at the request of his brethren. The Lives were partly the monasteries' charter, so to speak. They recorded the rights, dues, and

8 See R. Thurneysen, "Mittelirische Verslehren", *Irische Texte*, iii (1891), ed. Wh. Stokes and E. Windisch, 50. Also, G. Murphy, "Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland", *Early Irish Literature*, ed. James Carney (London, 1966), 103.

9 "Filidecht and Coimgne", *Eriu*, 18 (1958), 150.

10 *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London, 1961), 5.

11 *Ibid.*, 4.

privileges of the monastery, and at the same time they related the establishment of the community, its *raison d'être*. Read at the saint's festival or incorporated in a sermon, the Life of a saint was a reminder to the monks of their origin and the object of their collective loyalty and devotion.

The terms "Heroic Age" and "Age of Saints" are convenient references for the historian and student of history. The Chadwicks' use of these terms presupposes a certain concept of hero and saint. In their analysis, the hero is a warrior who proves his heroism in battle; opposed to him is the saint, a man in holy orders, who is esteemed for his knowledge, education, and religious fervour.<sup>12</sup> In Western thought, the hero has most often been associated with a martial figure. According to the eminent scholar, Georges Dumézil, Indo-European society was based upon a tripartite system in which existed three classes: priest, warriors, and cultivators, each with their respective functions of sovereignty, physical power, and fertility.<sup>13</sup> This ideology, he believed, is reflected in the beliefs and institutions of several Indo-European cultures, Celtic among them. In general, however, it may be said that a hero is considered as a being who is above the ordinary in strength and skill, and whose deeds have been beneficial to his people.

In Christian tradition, Christ may be perceived as the ultimate hero and martyr.<sup>14</sup> As there are no martyrs in the early Celtic Church, the hagiographers chose an alternative example of sacrifice to enhance the heroic stature of their saints. The saints were represented as martyrs of a different degree, heroes of a different kind.<sup>15</sup> They were detached from ordinary society in a world of spiritual devotion, contemplative and ascetic practices, and eremetical life. The saints were the "milites Christi", the soldiers of Christ, a concept of monastic literature which was taken over by the Irish monks with characteristic zeal.<sup>16</sup>

The Irish saints' ascetic practices and their position as holy men outside of society is similar to the lifestyle and status of the holy men of the Eastern Church, the Desert Fathers who promoted monasticism, self-mortification, and the eremetical ideal.<sup>17</sup> This ideal involved total subjugation of the body to the will, total renunciation of all worldly ties, such as those of family,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4f.

<sup>13</sup> See C. S. Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology* (Los Angeles, 1966), 1-22.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J., 1971), 349.

<sup>15</sup> See W. W. Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Brussels, 1965), 81-83, "De tribus ordinibus Sanctorum Hiberniae".

<sup>16</sup> J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* (London, 1931), 196-197.

<sup>17</sup> E. Dawes and N. H. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints* (Oxford, 1948).

property, business and social matters.<sup>18</sup> The third-century ascetics valued solitude and deprivation of material needs; they required a complete withdrawal from the material world to search for spirituality, to experience the revelation of self and communion with God which pagan religions could no longer offer.<sup>19</sup> The earliest known Life of a saint, the Life of St Antony by Athanasius, stresses Antony's devotion, his extreme asceticism, and his constant battles with demons of temptation. St Antony influenced the ascetic practices in the monasteries of the East for centuries. The Eastern Church came to recognise the importance of its desert hermits who, in the tradition of John the Baptist, spent their time in solitary meditation suffering the vicissitudes of climate and food supply with little or no succour. Such holy men were able to gather disciples around them and form their own communities. Once a holy man became known, he was an object for pilgrims seeking spiritual advice. Holy men like the pillar saints (for example, St Simeon Stylites) were popular preachers and held a considerable amount of influence in the Church and in local government.<sup>20</sup> The ascetic, being outside the normal controls and conventions of society, could act as arbitrators between rulers and the ruled, between small communities and the world, between men and their Maker.<sup>21</sup> The recluse had nothing to lose, nor anything (supposedly) he wished to gain.

The Irish *vitae* reflect these practices. Thus the Irish saints are represented as acting as mediators, protectors, and petitioners to the local rulers on behalf of the people, acquiring their petitions by some miracle or display of divine power. The Lives contain several accounts of the saints' severe ascetic practices which magnified their sanctity. St Cainnech endured fierce deprivation in the wilderness to the point that a young boy accompanying him died of starvation.<sup>22</sup> St Coemgen does cross-vigil for so long that a blackbird builds a nest in his hand; he continues in his exercise until the young birds hatch and fly away.<sup>23</sup> A similar incident occurs in the Life of St Findian; the saint finds his pupil Columba meditating with arms outstretched while birds rest on his hands and head.<sup>24</sup> St Ite, like St Cainnech, undergoes a severe fast until

18 See H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (London, 1936), 1 ff.

19 See E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965).

20 P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), 84.

21 H. Mayr-Harting, "Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse", *History*, 60 (1975), 337-352.

22 *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1910), I, Cainnech xxix. (Hereafter cited Plummer, *VSH*.)

23 *Bethada Náem nÉreann*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1922), Coemgen x. (Hereafter cited Plummer, *BNE*.)

24 *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, ed. Wh. Stokes (Oxford, 1890), 1. 2646.

an angel warns her to stop.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes, as in the case of St Maedoc, the saint petitions God by fasting until his demands are met.<sup>26</sup> Fasting was a regular means of gaining one's petition but not always approved by heaven. The practice, however, was used in secular legal suits as well. A classic case is the contention between St Ruadan and king Diarmait; each side fast against the other, until the king is tricked into submission.<sup>27</sup> In heavenly, as in earthly, suits, the saint is the victor; not only does his community benefit but his reputation is enhanced.

The severities of their ascetic regime might not always meet the approval of the saints' colleagues, according to some episodes in the Lives. When seven of St Comgall's disciples die of hunger, he is asked to relax his rule.<sup>28</sup> St Fintan allowed no cows, butter or milk in his monastery until he was rebuked by St Cainnech.<sup>29</sup> St Mochuda required his monks to plough their land without the aid of horses or oxen, but a rebuke from St Findian changed his mind.<sup>30</sup> The Irish saints accepted the discipline of their seniors in matters other than ascetic rules. St Columba, swayed by the jealous remarks of his monks, ordered the child of one of his lay-workers to be thrown into the sea, for the man loved it too much. Two white birds protected the infant until it was rescued by St Cainnech who was on his way to Iona. The elder saint, who was extremely angry over the incident, severely rebuked the younger.<sup>31</sup> St Dindian, hearing how so many flocked to St Rudan because he owned a marvellous lime tree which gave a sweet, soporific sap, caused the sap to cease flowing. The monks were to keep their minds on spiritual matters, not material pleasures.<sup>32</sup> St Mochuda, despite his protests and curses, was expelled from his monastery of Rathen at the instigation of neighbouring monastic communities — out of jealousy, according to his Life,<sup>33</sup> but more likely because he was occupying land already crowded by ecclesiastical establishments. Such rivalries reported in the *vitae* may well indicate historical rivalries, and the political situation in the Church at the time.<sup>34</sup>

Personal acts of asceticism, such as immersing oneself in freezing water, fasting alone in the wilderness, or suffering self-

<sup>25</sup> Plummer, *VSH*, II, Ite x.

<sup>26</sup> Plummer, *BNE*, Maedoc, xliii; *VSH*, II, Maedoc, xxxiii.

<sup>27</sup> Plummer, *VSH*, II, Ruadan, xvi.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Comgall, xii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Fintan, iv-v.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, I, Carthagus (Mochuda), xlv.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Cainnech, xxi.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, II, Ruadan, xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Plummer, *BNE*, 300-311; *VSH*, I, Carthagus (Mochuda), liii-lix.

<sup>34</sup> Plummer, *VSH*, I, cxxi.



mortification<sup>35</sup> was admirable in the individual but not to be condoned when forced upon others or taken to the extreme for no reason but personal glory. As acts of penance, the case was different; several severe penances were prescribed for various wrongdoings in the penitentials. Asceticism was contingent upon solitary meditation; it was a self-imposed martyrdom practised by the hermit in his cell who, to be a true soldier of Christ, had to renounce all luxuries and subsist on the barest of necessities.<sup>36</sup> The ascetic ideal of the desert saints was embraced with enthusiasm by the Irish, but it was meant to be a voluntary act and a personal achievement.

The Irish saints differed from the saints of the East in the emphasis they placed upon pilgrimage or "peregrinatio", leaving one's homeland in permanent exile.<sup>37</sup> To the Irish, this was a type of martyrdom and therefore a step towards perfection in holiness. Voluntary exile meant a complete renunciation not only of home and family ties, but of social status and legal rights. The author of a Life of Columba in the Book of Lismore chose the theme of pilgrimage to introduce the saint's *vita*, being well aware of its importance in the tradition of St Columba who forsook all of Ireland for permanent exile on Iona.<sup>38</sup> The concept of "peregrinatio", whether voluntary or penitential, was more important to the Irish saints than to any other saints probably, because of the sacrifice involved; the desert saints left their homes, but seldom strayed far from their homelands.

Nevertheless, the monastic traditions begun in the deserts of Syria and Egypt spread throughout the Church of late antiquity. The eremetical lifestyle fostered by St Antony became the standard of the Irish monasteries. The hermit's cell, the solitary recluse, the regime of asceticism was the ideal of the Irish holy man.<sup>39</sup> In the eyes of the layman, the saint's way of life gave him a power beyond comprehension and a standing outside the social norm. The struggles of the "milites Christi" against the temptations of the world and their self-inflicted sufferings for the sake of God were acts of heroism, for like secular heroes, the saints displayed a strength and endurance beyond the capacity of ordinary mortals.

In Dumézilian terms, the hero of Irish tradition is primarily a second-function figure — the warrior — while the saint is

35 *Ibid.*, Comgen, xviii; II, Comgall, xlvi, Fechin, xvii; I, Carthagus (Mochuda), li; Stokes, *Lives of the Saints*, I, 2719.

36 Plummer, *VSH*, I, cxix-cxxii; J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 5-10.

37 See K. Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, II (1960), 143-151; and T. M. Charles-Edwards, "The Social Background to Irish *Peregrinatio*", *Celtica*, II (1976), 43-59.

38 Stokes, *Lives of the Saints*, I, 655 ff.

39 See G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956), 2 f.



primarily a first-function figure — the priest. Although the saints may be called the “soldiers of Christ”, their characters and qualities are not those which are usually associated with a martial figure, nor could the characters and qualities of the Irish heroes be termed “saintly”. A pre-Dumézilian scholar, Stefan Czarnowski, attempted to define the hero in Irish society according to his social status and function, and to apply his definition to the “national hero of Ireland”, St Patrick.<sup>40</sup> The hero, in Czarnowski’s view, is the incarnation and perfection of a social value or ideal which conforms to the group which created him.<sup>41</sup> He is elected to the status of hero by his society, much as the saint is elected by his social group.<sup>42</sup> In representation, the hero is a fighter, a protector, and a victor; the act of combat is the heroic act *par excellence*. So, too, does the saint contend with his enemies and is victorious. By his death, the hero becomes a sacred person, a cult figure, a *mort divinisé*.

The hero is a cultural creation in Czarnowski’s definition; St Patrick is a hero to the Irish because they have perceived him as such. However, Czarnowski’s interpretation of St Patrick’s heroic status rests upon his idea of *la mort divine*. In death, the hero is transformed, becoming part of a special class between gods and men, and almost godlike himself.<sup>43</sup> The theme of *la mort divine* is, according to Czarnowski, the fundamental theme in Irish mythology. He sets out to demonstrate that there exists a close relationship between the Otherworld gods and the heroes of Irish society; this aspect of divinity in association with the hero is a crucial factor in the consolidation of his view that St Patrick is *the* national hero of Ireland. The pagan gods of Ireland, he is saying, take on a heroic form, particularly in the festivals which are a re-enactment of heroic deeds. The gods have two existences, a human and a divine. In the ritual of the fete, the human image is sacrificed, to be resurrected immediately as a divinity.<sup>44</sup> In the Easter festival, Czarnowski interprets Patrick’s rôle as that of a sacrificial god; in his legends, he has connections with the Otherworld equal to the initiates of the pagan festival. His Baculus Jesu is likened to the magic wand or sacred branch which is the key to the Otherworld; his voyage to an isle in the Tyrrhenian Sea,<sup>45</sup> where he acquired his staff, is said to be comparable to an initiation myth.<sup>46</sup>

Admittedly, it can be argued that secular heroes could become

40 *Le culte des heros et ses conditions sociales* (Paris, 1919).

41 *Ibid.*, 6.

42 *Ibid.*, 9.

43 *Ibid.*, 27.

44 *Ibid.*, 89-206.

45 See *Four Latin Lives of Saint Patrick*, ed. L. Bieler (Dublin, 1977), 77, 132.

46 Czarnowski, *Le culte des heros et ses conditions sociales*, 196-197.

sacred personages. An attempt to circumvent this case was made by A. G. van Hamel in his examination of Celtic mythology.<sup>47</sup> According to van Hamel, certain divine beings are not seen as gods in Celtic belief, but are more like "divine magicians" or divine protectors. They assist in war, provide abundance in peace, heal diseases, and perform all the functions expected of beings gifted with super-natural powers.

In the tales of Irish heroes and saints, they also perform protective functions similar to the functions of van Hamel's divine magicians. In this aspect, whether expressed in Dumézilian terms or not, the concepts of heroes, warriors, and saints overlap with one another. The hero of Irish hero-tales is a human being, not a god, who surpasses all others in his particular field. His character, qualities, and actions are always in excess, so to speak, of the capabilities of ordinary mortals. His social status is invariably of a high caste and he assumes, upon death, an aura of sacredness, but not divinity. One of his chief functions is to serve as protector and champion for his people; here, the example may be cited of Cuchulainn, the Irish hero *par excellence*, in terms of martial prowess.

The hero of Irish tradition, however, need not be exclusively a martial figure. In the cycle of tales which relate a hero's life, there are certain elements which are common to all heroic careers, in Western civilisations at least. These elements make up a pattern which has been given the name "the international heroic biography". The pattern has several variants, envisaged by different scholars at different times,<sup>48</sup> but each follows generally the same line. Using as model the formulation devised by Jan de Vries,<sup>49</sup> the pattern is something as follows:

- I. The hero is begotten by royal or divine parents under unusual circumstances.
- II. The birth of the hero takes place in an unusual way.
- III. The youth of the hero is threatened: he is exposed or hidden away to be brought up by foster-parents.
- IV. In his upbringing, the hero displays his qualities at an early age, or he is slow in development.
- V. The hero often acquires invulnerability.
- VI. The hero fights with a dragon or another monster.
- VII. The hero wins a maiden, usually after overcoming great dangers.
- VIII. The hero makes an expedition to the underworld.

47 "Aspects of Celtic Mythology", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 20 (1934), 207-248.

48 See A. Taylor, "The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative", *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 1 (1964), 114-129.

49 *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, trans. B. J. Timmer (London, 1963), 211 ff.

- IX. When the hero is banished in his youth he returns later and is victorious over his enemies. In some cases he has to leave the realm again which he has won with such difficulty.
- X. The death of the hero often takes place while he is still young.

The hero's life conforms, or is made to conform, to such a biographical pattern for this is the basic heroic myth, the common prototype of all heroes' lives which is repeated trans-historically and trans-culturally so that the hero may be recognised as such in spite of the changes in historical views of later generations.

With the use of de Vries' framework, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has demonstrated through the formula of the international heroic biography that the hitherto unheroic figure of Cormac mac Airt has in fact several of the characteristics of a hero.<sup>50</sup> Cormac mac Airt, in Irish tradition, is presented as the ideal king. He is supposed to have flourished in the third century A.D. as the king of Tara. He was a lawgiver and something of an Irish Solomon; under his rule, Ireland became a land of peace and prosperity. According to the Chadwicks, Cormac "stands for intellectual as against heroic activities".<sup>51</sup> Ó Cathasaigh, on the other hand, describes Cormac in Dumézilian terms as primarily a hero of the first function, a wise hero and a king-hero,<sup>52</sup> whereas someone like Cuchulainn is primarily a hero of the second function (although Cormac's own function is not exclusive of the other two).<sup>53</sup> Ó Cathasaigh suggests that the word "hero" be employed as the generic term for the type of personage who fits the heroic biographical pattern,<sup>54</sup> so that both Cormac and Cuchulainn, although of different character, may be considered as heroes in Irish tradition.

Cormac was the son of Art, king of Ireland, and Achtán, the daughter of Olc Aiche, a herdsman and a druid. He was conceived the night before Art's battle with his rival Mac Con (I). Art is slain and Mac Con succeeds to the kingship. Olc Aiche prophesies that the progeny borne by his daughter will be kings of Ireland until doomsday. The child is born in secret (II) and is raised away from Tara (and the dangers he might face from his father's usurper) until he reaches manhood (III). Then he makes his way to Tara, where his kingly nature is recognised through his wisdom and bearing (IV). Cormac takes over the kingship from Mac Con and rules for 40 years. When a child, he was given invulnerability to every harm by the spells of his druid grand-

<sup>50</sup> *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977).

<sup>51</sup> Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, i, 100.

<sup>52</sup> Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-71, 85 ff., 104-106.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



father (V). During his reign, he wins a maiden by kidnapping the daughter of the king of Leinster from her foster-father (VII). Later, he must make a journey to the Otherworld to rescue his wife and children kidnapped by an Otherworldly warrior (VIII). There are references in some tales in Cormac's cycle to his being exiled or deposed (IX), and he dies under somewhat mysterious and suspicious circumstances (X).<sup>55</sup> Ó Cathasaigh's reconstruction of Cormac's life-cycle shows that at least seven of de Vries' 10 episodes occur in Irish texts, enough to suggest Cormac's heroic status.

The Lives of the saints also contain common elements which form a pattern remarkably similar to the international heroic biography. An attempt to point out the correspondence between the pattern of Celtic saints' Lives and the international heroic biography was made by Alwyn Rees in 1936.<sup>56</sup> Rees revised a heroic biographical pattern set out by Lord Raglan in order to apply it to the life of what he termed the "ascetic hero". His scheme emphasised certain functions assumed by the saint which he considered reminiscent of the functions of divine priests and kings. The saints, as portrayed in the Lives, he believed, had become connected with the prosperity and well-being of the people and with the fertility of the land, qualities which were associated with the priests of pre-Christian Britain. The circumstances of the saint's birth, heralded by an omen or a miracle, he suggests, is meant to indicate a divine origin. The saint overcomes his enemy by means of his supernatural power; here, Rees draws a parallel with the contest of magic "which is an essential preliminary to the enthroning of a divine king".<sup>57</sup> The death of the saint, with its attendant omens and miracles, takes on, in Rees' scheme, a sacrificial significance, establishing a new connection with the deity each time in the same way that sacrifice was perceived in pre-Christian beliefs.<sup>58</sup>

Rees puts forward the figure of the saint in Celtic hagiology as a type of substitute deity. This, however, was not quite the case in Celtic tradition. Nevertheless, Rees was justified in applying the pattern of heroic biography to a type of hero other than the martial figure. Ó Cathasaigh has shown that the pattern as it operates in Irish tradition includes such a figure as Cormac mac Airt, a king-hero rather than a warrior-hero. On this basis, a slightly different pattern can be drawn from the Lives of the Irish saints for the "saintly biography", in which the heroic characteristics of the saint stand out. Briefly, it is as follows:

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-72.

<sup>56</sup> "The Divine Hero in Celtic Hagiology", *Folklore*, 47 (1936), 30-41.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



- I. The saint is (a) begotten of noble or royal parents; (b) there are prophecies and omens of his birth; (c) and his conception is unusual.
- II. The birth of the saint (a) takes place under unusual circumstances, (b) is accompanied by divine manifestations, and (c) the child is baptised by another holy man, often with the accompaniment of a miracle.
- III. In his youth and upbringing, (a) the saint is often accompanied by divine phenomena; (b) he is taught by another, older saint and (c) displays his miraculous powers at an early age.
- IV. The saint leaves his teacher and makes a pilgrimage (a) to Rome or a holy shrine, or (b) he is guided to his place of resurrection, or (c) he spends some time as recluse.
- V. The saint founds a monastery and attracts disciples.
- VI. The saint performs many miracles and tends to the needs of his community. He (a) often contends with the local pagan chieftain, magician, or with a monster, and (b) he is sometimes given a vision of heaven.
- VII. The saint foresees the time of his death and makes prophecies.
- VIII. The death of the saint occurs usually after a long life and is often accompanied by some divine manifestation.
- IX. After death, miracles occur at his tomb or in association with his relics.

The pattern shows a striking similarity between the birth of the hero and the birth of the saint, and, indeed, the birth of Christ. In his lifetime, the saint, like the hero, goes through a period of wandering or exile on his pilgrimage before he eventually settles down. The hero makes his way in the world by means of his own prowess, sometimes by the favour of the gods but more often in spite of them. The saint, on the other hand, proceeds through life under the protection and guidance of God. The saint's function as earthly mediator between men and God is reflected in Point VI, where he tends to the needs of his community.

The saint shares with the secular hero "one of the most common heroic deeds", the fight with a monster. The hero's victory leads him to acquire further status, perhaps a wife, and in some cases he may eventually acquire political power by defeating

his enemies and succeeding to a position of government. The saint's victory, as well as his victory over enemy rulers, also wins him further status, material benefits, and some political influence. De Vries' hero meets a fate which is sometimes known beforehand but always inescapable. This does not prevent him from going down fighting (as in the case of Cuchulainn who was made to violate his personal taboos) but the outcome has been settled long since by an implacable agency. Death for the saint is a welcome event, the time foreseen or revealed to him, and eagerly awaited as the final reward for an exemplary Christian life.

As examples of heroic saints (or saintly heroes), the Lives of St Patrick and St Columba may be cited.

In the Life of St Patrick by Muir-chu,<sup>59</sup> Patrick is born in Britain of Christian parents, his father being a deacon (I). At the age of 16, he is captured by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland, but with the help of the angel Victor he escapes and returns home, only to leave again for Gaul to be educated under St Germanus (III). On the death of Palladius, Patrick is chosen to be sent to preach to the Irish (IV). There, he overcomes the king of Tara and his magicians who try to prevent his mission when he celebrates Easter at the same time as a pagan festival. During his career, he performs several miracles (VI). A wealthy man gives him what is to be the site of Armagh, his chief foundation (V). The angel Victor warns Patrick of his approaching death (VII). He dies at the age of 120. There is no night for 12 days after his death and his body exudes the odour of sanctity (VIII). An angel tells his people he is to be buried where two untamed oxen, yoked to the cart carrying his body, come to rest. A flame is seen above his relics. Two tribes contend for his body, but to prevent conflict a vision of two carts drawn by oxen appears (IX).

According to Adomnan's Life of Columba,<sup>60</sup> he is born of the royal family of the northern Uí Néill. His mother sees an angel in a dream who gives her a marvellous mantle; the angel takes it away and prophesies the birth of a wondrous son (I). While a child, his mother sees a ball of fire above him, and other heavenly phenomena are seen about him. In his youth, he performs these miracles of turning water into wine for the Eucharist (III). Columba becomes a priest and establishes several monasteries in Ireland, but political events (not related in his official *vita*) lead him into exile on Iona (IV) where he founds his famous community (V). Throughout his life, he performs several miracles which Adomnan relates in Books I and II. He contends, at

59 "Vita Sancti Patricii", ed. Edmund Hogan, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 1 (1882), 531-585.

60 *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. A. O. and M. O. Anderson (London, 1961).

various times, with a magician, with the Loch Ness monster, and with the pagan king of the Picts (VI). He predicts the day of his death (VII) and dies in his church which is filled with angelic light (VIII). His relics have miraculous powers; books written by him are impervious to water and he is said to have protected his people from plague (IX).

It may be added that the birth story of St Kentigern has many points in common with the birth of the hero. From the *Life of Jocelin of Burness*,<sup>61</sup> his mother is a princess, his father unknown. The king rejects his daughter, setting her adrift at sea (somewhat like the story of Danae and Perseus). The boat comes to land at Culross, where the girl bears her son. St Servanus nearby hears the sound of angels, present at the birth. Shepherds find the mother and child who are taken into Servanus' protection. The child is given the name of Kentigern and nicknamed Mungo. Although a relatively late composition (later by far than Adomnan or Muir-chu), *Jocelin's Life of Kentigern* shows how a *vita* conforms to the conventional pattern. The boy displays his miraculous powers at an early age. He is educated by St Servanus but eventually leaves him to found a church at Glasgow. He is credited with numerous miracles throughout his life. He contends with a tyrant who is afflicted with gout for kicking the saint. At one point, he is forced to leave Glasgow for fear of his life. In his absence, the people turn away from the faith and the land suffers. Eventually the king asks him to return; the saint restores prosperity and drives out the demons from his flock. He is told the day of his death and dies at the age of 185. Miracles of healing are said to occur at his tomb.

Because the heroic biographical pattern is valid in an Irish context, it lends to the saintly biography a meaning in Irish literature. The pattern becomes a useful vehicle for the interpretation of the *Lives* in relation to early Irish literature in general. The idea of the saint as hero is a recognisable frame of reference in Irish society for a figure imported by a foreign religion. The inherent pattern in the *Lives* of the saints as a whole reinforces this idea underlying the saintly image. Although saints may have possessed a power equal to the druid-priests of the old religion, it was unlikely that they could have the same standing as their enemies. The heroic image, rather than the druidic image, was more suitable and easily acceptable for a Christian priest. The existence of the pattern in the *Lives* validates the image of the saint as the "hero of the new order", or preferably, as a new kind of hero in a changing social order.

The preceeding discussion serves to demonstrate how this image of the saint appears in the structure of the *Lives* and in

<sup>61</sup> *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern*, ed. and trans. Alexander Forbes (Edinburgh, 1874), 27-119.

relation to secular hero-tales. With respect to the history of the Church in Ireland, the Lives are poor in historical facts regarding political events and dates, but rich in legend, in stories of miracles, and in descriptions of the saints' way of life which reflect the attitude of the hagiographers toward their illustrious patron saints.

With respect to Irish hagio-biography, an illustration has been provided of the various influences which came into the composition of the Lives, from both ecclesiastical and secular sources. The Irish hagiographers were in touch with their native tradition and with the traditions of the continental Church. The pattern of the "saintly biography", as here described, is not exclusive to Celtic saints' Lives: all mediaeval hagiographers shared a common Christian tradition. The analogy of saints' Lives with hero-tales, particularly the hero-tales of Ireland, give the *vitae* of the Celtic Church a meaning in a Celtic context; the Lives of the Irish saints are an integral part of early Irish literature alongside the hero-tales of Ireland, as the saints themselves, the monks and clerics, were a part of Irish society.